

THE OBLIGATIONS OF FREEDOM
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Galatians 5:1, 13-14
Luke 9: 51-62
Psalm 77: 1-15

“For freedom Christ has set us free.”
Galatians 5:1 (NRSV)

Driven by a sense of providence and an acute appreciation of the fallibility
of humankind,
the Founders created a nation in which religion should not be singled out
for special help
or particular harm. . . . The balance remains perhaps the most brilliant
American success.
This victory is often lost in the clatter of contemporary cultural and political
strife.
Looking back to the Founding is neither an exercise in nostalgia nor an
attempt to deify the dead, but a bracing lesson in how to make a diverse
nation survive and thrive
by cherishing freedom and protecting faith. And faith and freedom are
inextricably linked:
it is not for priests or pastors or presidents or kings to compel belief,
for to do so trespasses on each individual's God-given liberty of mind and
heart.

Jon Meacham
American Gospel:
God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation

When you have known what it is
To be loved freely,
Submission no longer
Has any taste . . .

All the submissions, all the dejections in the world
Are not equal in value to the soaring up point,
The beautiful straight soaring up of
One single invocation
From a love that is free.

That's French poet Charles Péguy, in his poem "Freedom." When I read it again last week, in preparation for a sermon for the Sunday before the Fourth of July, I was reminded of the story of Nelson Mandela. On February 11, 1990, Mandela emerged from a South African prison where he had been held for twenty-seven years. He was seventy-two years old.

His crime was advocating and organizing and fighting for the freedom of his people against the apartheid policies and programs of the South African government at the time. He was called a terrorist. His imprisonment was brutal at first: little food, crushing stones all day. He was allowed no visitors, one letter in and one letter out per year.

Finally allowed to read, write, and converse with other political prisoners, his thinking about freedom deepened and broadened. He wrote:

It was during those long and lonely years that my hunger for the freedom of my own people became a hunger for the freedom of all people, white and black. I knew as well as I know anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man's freedom is a prisoner of hatred; he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness. I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else's freedom. (*Long Road to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*, 1994).

Mandela's spirit simply refused to be broken. Even his guards came to respect him.

When he was finally released from prison and apartheid was abolished, the world slowly came to realize that it was witnessing an extraordinary example of humanity and a unique demonstration of the meaning of freedom. During an interview on the Larry King show, Mandela was asked how, after twenty-seven years of incarceration by one of the world's most oppressive regimes, twenty-seven years of separation from family, friends—how was it that he didn't hate his captors and desire revenge. His response was, and is, amazing.

Mandela said simply that revenge would be a distraction from the goal of freedom for his people. "They kept me in prison for twenty-seven years. If they caused me to hate, I would have been in their prison for the rest of my life" (reported by Joan Brown Campbell, at the time General Secretary of the National Council of Churches).

Nelson Mandela understood the meaning, and the obligations, of freedom.

It is a basic theme of the Bible. In fact, in many ways the Bible's basic message is about freedom, both personal and political. In the very first story in the Bible, human beings are free in a way the rest of creation is not. Adam and Eve, human beings, man and woman, are free to name the other creatures. They are also free to make decisions, moral choices, free to be responsible or irresponsible, free actually to pay attention to and obey God and free to ignore, disobey. We are free, from the first page of the Bible, religious and political philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev observed, to go to hell, if that is our choice.

When the children of Israel are in real captivity as slaves in Egypt, God, the Bible says, hears their cries for freedom and sends a liberator by the name of Moses, who leads them out of slavery into freedom, autonomy, self-determination. Throughout the Bible God is always an agitator for freedom, urging and helping people to be free of anything that enslaves and prevents them from being everything God created them to be. The Bible says, "Wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."

The Bible is also realistic about the fragility of freedom, the risks and obligations that come along with freedom. Not long after the children of Israel escape the yoke of slavery, they find themselves in the desert; there's no water or food and they're not sure at all about where they're going next. As it turns out, they'll have to deal with it all for forty years. But at the moment, a few miles from slavery and into the desert, a few hours of freedom, and they're already looking back. Slavery wasn't so bad, after all. There was food and water and a roof over their heads at least. It was slavery, to be sure, but it was safe and secure and predictable, and in their new, radical freedom they began to miss their oppressors.

It is a sobering reality of history that fearful people become willing voluntarily to relinquish freedom in the name of security. The German people elected the Nazi party and Adolf Hitler, after all. Hysterical fear of communism led people in the 1950s to consider restricting freedom of the press, speech and assembly, basic American freedoms guaranteed in the First Amendment, the Bill of Rights. Currently, fear of terror has led us to relinquish our right to privacy to a government that wants to monitor our phone calls, e-mails, the books we read, and the videos we watch, without securing a warrant to do so.

The founders of our nation knew how very precious freedom is, how rare in human history and how fragile. We remember them this week. At a particularly difficult moment, when everything that could go wrong was, the Psalmist starts to wonder if there is any hope, if God has forgotten to be gracious, and then he remembers, "I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord." Memory will comfort and inspire and strengthen. Abraham Lincoln,

in his first inaugural, as the nation was about to divide, invoked “the mystic chords of memory.” It is good to remember.

It was July 1, 231 years ago today, that they took the first vote on the resolution. John Adams rose to speak. Historian David McCullough says that although Adams was not a great orator, he spoke “logically, clearly, carefully” . . . and “looking into the future saw a new nation, a new time.” Two delegates from New Jersey, Frances Hopkinson and John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian minister, arrived late, after Adams had been speaking for an hour. Witherspoon asked Adams to start over again, and after some good-natured banter, Adams began again. It was stifling hot in Philadelphia. They discussed and debated for nine hours. A preliminary vote was taken on whether to declare independence. Nine colonies voted in favor. The delegates adjourned and talked late into the night at the City Tavern, where many of them were lodging and where word arrived that there were 100 British ships approaching New York Harbor.

They resumed debate at 9:00 in the morning, July 2, and at 10:00 a second vote was taken. This time all thirteen colonies voted in the affirmative. They had declared their independence. Adams later wrote to his wife, Abigail,

Objects of the most stupendous magnitude, measures in which the lives and liberties of millions, born and unborn, are most essentially interested, are now before us. We are in the midst of a revolution, the most complete, unexpected, and remarkable of any in the history of the world. . . . The second day of July 1776 will be the most memorable epoch in the history of America. . . . It will be celebrated by succeeding generations . . . from this time forward and forevermore. (McCullough)

They continued to discuss and debate for two more days and sent Thomas Jefferson to his desk to write it. This is how he began:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Endowed by the Creator with certain unalienable rights. God, Jefferson wrote, is the source of freedom, the author of liberty.

They voted a final time on July 4 and then lined up and signed it, pledged their fortunes and sacred honor and their lives. They had no illusions. They were committing treason against the government when they signed the document. In a speech on the meaning of freedom that he delivered at West Point last November, Bill Moyers reminded the cadets that the founders’ commitment to freedom was so strong that they were willing to put their names on a document that would be their death warrant if they failed.

They were believers—Deists mostly; they believed in “Nature’s God,” the “God of Providence.” Some, not all, were conventionally orthodox Christian. John Adams loved the Episcopal liturgy but theologically was a Unitarian. John Jay was a devout Episcopalian, Sam Adams a Puritan, Thomas Paine a skeptic, John Witherspoon a Presbyterian, and Benjamin Franklin an ecumenist. He tried Presbyterianism but became disenchanted with the Presbyterian congregation because they were fighting about the minister. (Some things never change.) Franklin came to the assistance of John Carroll of Maryland, the first American Roman Catholic Bishop. Franklin was so religiously flexible that Adams wrote in frustration, “The Catholics thought him almost a Catholic. The Church of England claimed him as one of theirs. The Presbyterians thought him half a Presbyterian, and the Friends believed him a ‘wet’ Quaker.”

They understood that political freedom rests on the foundation of religious freedom and religious freedom rests on the freedom of the individual human conscience. Jefferson arranged for his gravestone to bear three inscriptions only:

Founder of the University of Virginia
Author of the Declaration of Independence
Author of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom

His opening words for the Virginia Statute: “Whereas Almighty God hath created the mind free.”

While he was in Paris, it fell to James Madison to carry it through. If the mind is free, the state must not violate the individual conscience on matters of religion. Madison wrote,

Whilst we assert for ourselves a freedom to embrace, to profess, and observe the religion which we believe to be of divine origin, we cannot deny an equal freedom to those whose minds have not yet yielded to the evidence that has convinced us.

It was not a Christian nation. It would be a free country. They knew they had invented something new and wonderful and precious: a government based on individual freedom.

In his book *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation*, *Newsweek* editor Jon Meacham says that “our finest hours, the Revolutionary War, abolition, the expansion of the rights of women, fights against terror and tyranny, the battle against Jim Crow—can partly be traced to religious ideas about liberty, justice, and charity” (p. 15).

“For freedom Christ has set us free,” St. Paul wrote. It comes at the end of a lengthy argument about the relationship of the religious law to Christian freedom in a letter Paul wrote to the early church in Galatia. It has been called the Christian Magna Carta. Paul was a Jew. Jesus was a Jew. So were his disciples. So were all the first Christians. Jesus said that he had come to fulfill the law of Moses. The law, the 613 rules and regulations based on the Ten Commandments, regulated all of life: prescribed what to eat and what to wear, when to work and when to rest, how to cook, raise children, and farm. The law of Moses has given order and cohesion and life to the Jewish people through twenty centuries of exile, discrimination, persecution, and genocide. It is not to be taken lightly.

The problem was that Gentiles were becoming Christians, and to Jews they looked like a motley bunch: they ate what they pleased, didn’t keep kosher, observe Shabbat, and were singularly uninterested in circumcision. So delegations were dispatched from Jerusalem to tell the Gentile Christians that they had missed something important. They weren’t real Christians until they conformed to the law. The conflict forced Paul to think through one of the most important ideas of our faith. We are saved by faith, not works. We are loved by God in Jesus Christ, and there is nothing we can do to earn that love. It is grace that saves us and sets us free from all the ways human beings have tried to persuade God to be gracious. We are free in Christ, Paul wrote, free to live in joyful gratitude—free to fulfill what Paul said was the real intent of the law, namely to love your neighbor as yourself. “For freedom, Christ has set us free—never submit to the yoke of slavery,” he wrote. But it is not license, freedom to do whatever it is you want to do. In fact it comes with obligations: to love your neighbor. “Become slaves to one another,” he put it.

Those brave souls who signed the Declaration of Independence weren’t proposing freedom to whatever anyone fancied doing. Maybe more than anyone in history they understood political liberty to mean more than freedom from political coercion, to mean the obligation to serve the common good. They understood that people in the future would have to continue to argue about it and struggle for it, fight for it, defend it, die for it. They understood the obligations of freedom.

In that remarkable speech on the meaning of freedom at West Point, Bill Moyers talked about how the founders so believed in liberty, trusted people to know and understand it, they went to great lengths to assure and protect it. For instance, they made it very difficult for an individual to take the country to war. That, they thought, was an infringement on the freedom of the people. He reminded the cadets, some—perhaps many—of whom would be fighting in Iraq, that in the months leading up to the war, Rupert Murdoch, who put his press empire at the service of the government in

making the case for the war, said that when it was over and oil was \$20 a barrel again, the whole world would benefit.

Moyers reminded the cadets that the founders made it very difficult for the government to decide to go to war and that the last time Congress actually declared war was 1941. He told them that twice in forty years we have gone to war, paying lip service to the founders' warnings and the Constitution. The first, while he was press secretary to President Johnson, we lost, and the second, he said, a bloody debacle—two of the great blunders in our history.

The politicians, he told future combat officers, have “left our soldiers trapped in Iraq, having created conditions for a savage sectarian and civil war—unable to discern civilians from combatants, unable to kill the enemy faster than rage makes new ones.”

The army has been ordered to violate clear mandates of the Uniform Code of Military Justice and the Geneva Conventions so as to allow indefinite and secret detention and torture—very significant violations of the nation's 231-year-old commitment to liberty and justice and the basic rights of all.

And he told the cadets that dissent from the decision to go to war is not unpatriotic, that it is a basic freedom, the defense of which is the reason we have an army in the first place.

“Take note,” he said, “the American people want the truth about how their sons and daughters are doing in Iraq. . . . Finally, and this above all else,” he said, a lesson he wished he had learned earlier, “speak the truth as you see it. . . . Among my military heroes are the generals who frankly told the president and his advisors that their information and plans were both incomplete and misleading—and who paid the price.” Brave patriots like General Eric Shinseki. And for me, General Antonio M. Taguba, who was assigned responsibility to investigate charges of torture at Abu Ghraib and who, when he told the truth, was forced to retire.

“The meaning of freedom,” Moyers concluded, “begins with the still small voice of conscience, where each of us decides what we will live and die for.”

Moyers said later that he thought he had surely offended the future leaders of our armed forces, and indeed, when he sat down the cadets were silent at first. And then they applauded and stood and applauded and applauded.

What a precious thing it is to be free. We were reminded this weekend, with the discovery of two undetonated car bombs in the heart of London and a car bomb at the Glasgow airport, that freedom is precious, that free societies are vulnerable. I talked to one of the people from the Fourth

Presbyterian Church mission trip to the Middle East, where they worked in the West Bank. They learned a lot; saw a lot; visited Palestinian refugee camps; saw the wall that was built to protect Israelis but also separates Palestinians from their work and farms; saw Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum; saw people living in fear. She said, we don't get everything right here, but walking down Michigan Avenue, seeing that wonderful ethnic, religious, racial mix—a Muslim woman with her head covered, young people in T-shirts and flip flops, tourists, shoppers, a Catholic priest—none of them afraid, enjoying freedom. We get that right.

Freedom is also vulnerable. There are terrorists who would use our freedom to hurt us. May we not forget, in our fear, that finally what we have to offer the world is not our military might but freedom, our oldest and most precious of values. May we not forget, in our fear, that the most effective way to work for peace, our own and the world's, is not to ignore those values but to live by them as a nation, to show the world what freedom looks like.

And may we, followers of Jesus Christ, never forget that in his gracious love, we have been freed finally from all that would threaten, diminish, or oppress us—free from fear, free deep in our hearts and souls, free to live and laugh and love and give our lives away in the service of others.

The poet said,
All the submissions in the world
Are not equal to one single invocation from a love that is free.

And so . . .

*Our fathers' God, to thee, Author of liberty, to thee we sing;
Long may our land be bright with freedom's holy light;
Protect us by thy might, Great God our King.*

Amen